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Understanding Partner Loss in Same-Sex Couples

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Lesbian and Gay Partner Bereavement

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Abstract

The goal of the present study is to examine the difficulties faced by sexual minorities who have lost their partners. More specifically, the impact of outness, relationship comfort, and social support on the bereavement process of same- and mixed-sex couples will be overviewed. The hypothesis of the present study is to examine whether social support, relationship comfort, and visibility mediate the relationship between sexual orientation and stress after the loss of a partner. In previous research, social support for the recently bereaved has been studied quite extensively; however, research has yet to examine sexual minorities and the specific hindrances this demographic may face. In order to test this, we have to first examine the correlation between sexual orientation and stress. If significant, we will test three separate mediation models using the aforementioned variables. Our inclusion criteria will be any adult over the age of 60 whose partner or spouse of at least 2 years has died and who is not currently in a relationship. Our predictor is sexual orientation. The mediators will include social support, visibility, and relationship comfort. The outcome will be a perceived stress measure. For hypothesis 1, we will be looking at the correlation between sexual orientation and stress for the entire sample. For hypotheses 2 through 4, a regression will be used in order to examine partial correlations between our predictor, respective mediators, and our outcome. Although the loss of a spouse has been extensively studied in the sexual majority population, there is a lack of research focused on the difficulties or resilience faced by lesbian and gay individuals who have lost their partners. This study will be a stepping stone to understanding the diverse ways in which sexual minority partners cope with the loss of a partner or spouse.

Research Question

Is the relationship between sexual orientation and stress in recent widows mediated by visibility, comfort, and/or social support?

Literature Review

- Widowhood is generally seen as one of the most stressful life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)
- Social support and social relationships are often described as some of the most important predictors in subjective well-being (Argyle, 2001)
 - Same-sex couples may have an entirely different family dynamic than mixed-sex couples typically studied
- In an article by Rostosky and Riggle, minority stress is linked to psychological and physical health disparities in the LGB population (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017)
 - Minority stress is related to five factors: experience of discrimination and prejudice, expectations of rejection, making decisions about disclosure or concealment, internalized stigma or negative views of one's own identity as LGB or same-sex partnered, and coping with these stress experiences
 - The aforementioned variables are believed to be found in LGB couples
 - LGB couples handle these stressors as a dyad (couple), so with the loss of a partner, this stress may not be dealt with as successfully by the individual

Protective Factors

Visibility

- Caron and Ulin (1997) in a study of 124 lesbians examining the impact of closeting found:
 - It is likely that closeting plays a critical role in the quality of same-sex relationships
 - Closeting can limit social support received from friends and family, negatively affecting the relationship. Those in mixed-sex relationships may be more likely to experience an affirmation of the relationship, making visibility and acceptance more likely

- The more support a lesbian receives from the important people in her life, the better quality of her relationship

Comfort in the Relationship

- The anxiety, shame, and devaluation of LGB people and one's self are inherent to internalized homophobia and are likely to be most overtly manifested in interpersonal relationships with other LGB individuals (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Essentially, LGB individuals devalue themselves due to internalized homophobia, and this devaluation is often expressed in romantic relationships with their partners.
 - These negative feelings can affect the bereavement process

Social Support

- In an article by de Vries and colleagues, it was shown that among those more recently bereaved (18 months or less), support was more forthcoming from their children than from any other network members.
- Chosen Family
 - LGBTQ participants often perceive less social support for their relationships from parents, they place more value on approval of their relationship from friends or chosen family (Blair & Pukall, 2015)

Hypotheses

1. Social orientation will be correlated to stress in that widows who were in same-sex relationships will have higher perceived stress levels than mixed-sex couple widows.
2. Social support will mediate the relationship between sexual orientation and stress
3. Relationship comfort will mediate the relationship between sexual orientation and stress.
4. Visibility will mediate the relationship between sexual orientation and stress.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study will include 250 same-sex widow(er)s at least 60 years of age recruited through the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland, World Pride, major cities' pride festivals, social media, and websites and organization geared specifically towards gay and lesbian adults.

Participants must have been in a cohabiting committed relationship with their partner for at least 2 years at the time of his or her death. Participants will be age 60 or older and will be matched by both length of relationship and time passed since death. For any participants who had been in

a relationship with their partner for under 10 years, same-sex subjects will be matched with mixed-sex subjects in two year increments, meaning that someone who is with their partner for 5 years can be matched with someone who had been with their partner from anywhere between 3 to 7 years.. Those who had been in a relationship for over ten years will be matched in five year increments. This means that, for example, someone who had been with their partner for 15 years can be matched with someone who had been with their partner from anywhere between 10 and 20 years. Similarly, for participants who have lost a partner within the past five years, subjects will be matched in one year intervals (someone who has lost a partner three years ago can be matched with someone who has lost their partner between two and four years ago), and those who have lost partners over five years ago will be matched in two year increments (someone who lost their partner seven years ago can be matched with someone who lost their partner anywhere between five and nine years ago).

Materials

Refer to the appendix for the full measures used in this study

Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation will be measured during demographic collection for this study. Each participant will indicate both his or her own gender as well as the gender of the partner that he/she has lost. Although this may not necessarily completely measure sexual orientation, the relevant factor is whether or not participants were in a same-sex or mixed-sex relationship.

Perceived Social Support. The (Modified) Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was developed to measure perceived social support from friends, family, and significant others. The modified version of this scale has replaced perceived social support from significant others with questions measuring any sort of individual. An example of a modified significant other question changes “There is a special person around when I am in need” to “There is someone around when I am in need.” The scale consists of 12 questions that are rated on a 7-point scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). A higher score indicates higher levels of social support. This scale has been used in various settings, age groups, and cultural backgrounds. (Zimet et al., 1988).

Internal Comfort with Relationship Status. The (Modified) Short Internalized Homonegativity Scale contains 20 items in which participants are asked to endorse the extent to which they agreed to each statement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 for “Strongly disagree” to 7 for “Strongly agree.” Higher scores indicate higher internalized homonegativity. The original measure has been changed for this study to examine comfort levels with a relationship among any sample. An example of question change for this scale is from “It is important for me to control who knows about my homosexuality” to “It is important for me to control who knows about my sexual orientation” (Currie, Cunningham, & Findlay, 2004).

Level of Outness/Visibility. The (Modified) Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS-C) is a 10-item measure with a concealment-disclosure subscale. The scales and subscales have good internal reliability, discriminant, convergent, and predictive validity. Responses are given on an 11-point Likert-type scale, ranged from 0 (“Never avoid”) to 11 (“Always avoid”). These questions ask participants about their level of sexual concealment among five different groups: immediate family, friends, people at work or school, and strangers. The prompt for the NOS-C has changed the words “sexual orientation” to relationship to better measure any individual’s relationship visibility (Meidlinger & Hope, 2014).

Stress. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a 14-item measure that assess feelings and thoughts of participants in the last month. Responses range from 0 (“Never”) to 4 (“very often”). The PSS has been shown to demonstrate good internal and test-retest reliability and is a good predictor of health-related outcomes. The relationships between the PSS and validity criteria are unaffected by age or sex. (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

Procedure

Participants will be emailed the link to the online surveys. After reading the consent form, participants will be prompted to complete the questionnaires. In addition to the questionnaires, general demographic information will be collected.

Proposed Analyses

Descriptive Statistics

We will calculate the means, standard deviations, and ranges of all our variables in order to examine the data distribution of our sample.

Analyses

In order to test for group differences (hypothesis 1) between our gay and straight widowed sample, we look at the correlations between sexual orientation and stress. For hypotheses 2 through 4, a hierarchical linear regression will be run to test whether social support, comfort, and visibility mediate the relationship between sexual orientation and stress. Specifically, we will first examine whether there is a relationship between sexual orientation and stress. Next, we will examine whether there are relationships between sexual orientation and our mediators (relationship visibility, relationship comfort, social support), followed by whether these mediators significantly correlate with stress. Finally, when each mediator variable is included in the model, we will examine whether the initial relationship between sexual orientation and stress is reduced to nonsignificance.

Discussion

This study is important for several reasons. To begin, as marriage is now legal for both mixed-sex and opposite-sex couples, it will be important to take note of the ways in which grief may be handled differently among these two groups. As it is expected that same-sex couples may experience particular stressors in life, it will be important to examine how those differences may influence a grieving partner/spouse after death. Additionally, although much research has been done on the typical grieving process, social support, and stress levels of mixed-sex couples, these findings may not directly apply or even be similar to individuals in a same-sex partnership. In order to help all those encountering bereavement, it is important to study differing groups and the aspects of grief that may pose a threat to a typical healthy bereavement process.

Appendix

Demographic Section

These questions have an open-ended answer section so that the participant can answer fully and in their own words to better gain a picture of the relationship, death, and surrounding circumstances that may be relevant to this study.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. Would you say that the area in which you live is predominantly liberal or conservative?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. What was the gender identity of your partner?
6. How long had you and your partner been together before their passing?
7. What was your partner's cause of death?

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support.

1. There is someone around when I am in need
2. There is a person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows
3. My family really tries to help me
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family
5. I have someone who is a source of comfort for me
6. My friends really try to help me
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong
8. I can talk about my problems with my family
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows
10. There is someone in my life who cares about my feelings
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends

The Short Internalized Homonegativity Scale.

Think about your sexual orientation (e.g. gay, straight, bisexual, etc) and answer the following questions by inserting your sexual orientation into the blank space.

1. I am comfortable about people finding out that I am _____
2. It is important to me to control who knows about my _____

3. I feel comfortable discussing _____ in a public situation
4. Even if I could change _____ I wouldn't
5. I feel comfortable being seen in public with an obviously _____ person
6. Most _____ people cannot sustain a long-term committed relationship
7. Most _____ people prefer anonymous sexual encounters
8. _____ tend to flaunt their sexuality inappropriately
9. Gay men are generally more promiscuous than straight men
10. I often feel intimidated while at _____ venues
11. Social situations with _____ men make me feel uncomfortable
12. I feel comfortable in _____ bars
13. Making an advance to another person is difficult for me

The Nebraska Outness Scale.

(NOS-D) What percent (0% to 100%) of the people in this group do you think are aware of your sexual orientation (meaning they are aware of whether you consider yourself straight, gay, etc)? Please indicate the percentage for each question.

Members of your immediate family (e.g. parents and siblings)

Members of your extended family (e.g. aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)

People you socialize with (e.g. friends and acquaintances)

People at your work/school (e.g. coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)

Strangers (e.g. someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)

(NOS-C) How often do you avoid talking about topics related to or otherwise indicating your relationship status (e.g. not talking about your significant other, changing your mannerisms) when interacting with members of these groups?

Members of your immediate family (e.g. parents and siblings)

Members of your extended family (e.g. aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins)

People you socialize with (e.g. friends and acquaintances)

People at your work/school (e.g. coworkers, supervisors, instructors, students)

Strangers (e.g. someone you have a casual conversation with in line at the store)

The Perceived Stress Scale.

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate *how often* you felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer each question fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way, but rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

For each question, choose from the following alternatives:

- 0. Never
- 1. Almost never
- 2. Sometimes
- 3. Fairly often
- 4. Very often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
- 4.^a In the last month, how often have you dealt successfully with irritating life hassles?
- 5.^a In the last month, how often have you felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?
- 6.^a In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- 7.^a In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
8. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- 9.^a In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- 10.^a In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
11. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of the things that happened that were outside of your control?

12. In the last month, how often have you found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?

13.^a In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?

14. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

^a Scored in the reverse direction.

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